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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Asian Pacific American high school students struggle to gain social support, cultural affirmation, and political empowerment. Four distinct case studies are highlighted: (1) an urban elite public school in which entrance is by examination; (2) an urban nonelite neighborhood public school; (3) a wealthy suburban public school; and (4) the Conference/Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth, a project of students supported by university and community resources outside of school. Participant observation and interviews with students in each setting illustrate Asian Pacific American students in a variety of institutional contexts. The first three cases illustrate the ways through which students in specific school settings analyze and respond to critical issues that affect them, including racial harassment, the need for bilingual and bicultural support services, and stereotypes in the curriculum. In each of these three schools, the students' commitments to organize and make positive changes are not shared by adults, and the changes are not made. In the fourth case, students from the collaborative, community-based effort work to organize a regional conference for Asian Pacific American youth. Strong adult support contributed to their success. Lessons from the failures and successes of these case studies suggest how educators, parents, and community members can support students' efforts more effectively. (Contains 25 references.) (SLD)

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An Occasional Paper

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We Could Shape It

Organizing for Asian Pacific American Student Empowerment

by

Peter Nien-chu Kiang

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An Occasional Paper

INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES
University of Massachusetts Boston

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We Could Shape it

Organizing for Asian Pacific American Student Empowerment[1]

PETER NIEN-CHU KIANG

With the doubling of the school-age population of Asian Pacific Americans during the 1990s, the unmet needs of Asian Pacific Americans are escalating dramatically in schools throughout the country. In most settings, teachers, counselors, and administrators do not share the ethnic, linguistic, and racial backgrounds of their Asian Pacific American students. Constrained by limited resources, an increasingly hostile, anti-immigrant climate, and their own stereotypical assumptions, educators have been unable to respond effectively to the full range of academic, social, and personal challenges that face growing numbers of Asian Pacific American students (Trueba, Cheng, and Ima, 1993; Kiang and Lee, 1992).

At the same time, due to linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and economic pressures, Asian Pacific American parents, most of whom are immigrants, typically do not participate or intervene consistently in their children's schooling, even if they express high expectations at home for their children's educational success (Tran, 1992; Morrow, 1989; Kitano and Chinn, 1986). Thus Asian Pacific American students are often left on their own to manage and mediate their experiences in school.

[1]This study was completed with funding from the Research Fellows Program of the Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston and with research assistance from UMass Boston students, Chin-Lan Chen, Marty Cosgrove, Paul Davis, Jenny Kaplan, Carol Ann Neff, and Arlene Reidinger. Case 2 is adapted from a larger study conducted with Jenny Kaplan. Michelle Janmey and Amy Emura provided valuable editorial assistance. Finally, I am especially grateful to CAPAY and the many high-school students who shared their voices and visions with me. A version of this study is published under the same title in *Cherished Dreams: Educating Asian Pacific American Children*, edited by Li-Rong Lilly Cheng and Valerie Ooka Pang, SUNY Press, 1996.

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This paper examines how Asian Pacific American high school students struggle to gain social support, cultural affirmation, and political empowerment. Four distinct case studies are highlighted: City Academy High School, an urban examination (elite) public school; City South High School, an urban neighborhood (non-elite) public school; Westlake High School, a wealthy, suburban public school; and the Conference/Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY), a project of students and youth supported by university and community resources outside of school. Based on participant observation and extensive interviews with Asian Pacific American students in each setting, these case studies offer opportunities to listen, as Nieto and others urge, to the voices and views of urban immigrant/refugee students, suburban immigrant, and American-born students in a variety of institutional contexts (Nieto, 1994; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1992; Poplin and Weeres, 1992).

The first three cases illustrate ways through which students in specific school settings analyze and respond to critical issues that affect them, including racial harassment, the need for bilingual/bicultural support services, and stereotypes in the curriculum. In each of these three cases, however, students' commitments to organize and make positive changes are not shared by most adults in their schools and ultimately go unfulfilled. The fourth case focuses on students from a variety of schools who become the core of a collaborative, community-based effort to organize a regional conference for Asian Pacific American youth. In contrast to the three school-based cases, students in the final case who had strong adult support succeed in establishing an ongoing student/youth network following their landmark conference, and in the process, empower and transform themselves. By sharing lessons from both the failures and successes of students' organizing efforts, this paper suggests how educators, parents, and community members can support students' efforts more effectively.

Confronting Racial Harassment: Who Cares

> *I'm not going to walk home with tears running down my brown cheeks like the old days... I would stand up for myself because, if I don't, who will? Nobody stood up for me when I was spat at, kicked at, or cussed out just for being Cambodian* (Pho, 1993, p.14).

Issues of racial harassment severely affect Asian Pacific American students, as documented by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1992) and other studies of school climate (Pompa, 1994; Sing and Lee, 1994; First and Willshire Carrera, 1988). The Commission's landmark report states:

> The pervasive anti-Asian climate and the frequent acts of bigotry and violence in our schools not only inflict hidden injuries and lasting damage, but also create barriers to the educational attainment of the Asian American student victims (p.97–98).

Confirming the Commission's national findings, Michele Ott (1994) found, based on a survey of 266 Asian Pacific American students from a variety of urban and suburban school districts in New England, that:

- 54% of the respondents had been called names or harassed and 24% had been physically attacked in school;

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- 9 out of 10 had heard of or witnessed an Asian Pacific American student being harassed, and 6 out of 10 had heard of or witnessed one being physically attacked;
- 69% had never reported any incident to a teacher;
- 25% felt that teachers would not care, and 30% believed that teachers would not do anything, even if incidents were reported; and
- of those students who had experienced harassment, one out of three had considered dropping out of school.

Ott's regional findings are further validated by ethnographic profiles of individual schools (Kiang, Nguyen, and Sheehan, 1995; Kiang and Kaplan, 1994; Kagiwada, 1989). In one urban high school, for example, Semons (1991) observes:

> By far, the majority of the negative comments directed toward an outside group were targeted toward Asian students. Negative comments about Asians were overheard in the presence of teachers, who did nothing to interrupt them. Students could therefore infer that prejudice against Asians was acceptable, unlike prejudice against Blacks (p. 147).

Though not the situation in every school, similar dynamics are explored in the following case.

Case Study 1: City Academy High School

The City Academy is an urban school serving about 1,500 students in grades seven to twelve. The student population is approximately 19% Asian, 41% white, 33% Black, and 7% Latino. The school is one of the city's three elite, examination public high schools for which admissions are based on results from standardized tests administered by the school district during sixth grade. Four out of the school's 71 teachers are Asian Pacific American. There are no Asian Pacific American administrators. The headmaster is a Hispanic female. The curriculum is traditional with an emphasis on "classics," although students have opportunities to participate in educational and cultural activities sponsored by various cultural clubs after school.

Racial climate became a focus of the school's attention following a fight in the cafeteria started by a white male student who called Jenny[2], a Chinese American female, "a fucking gook." After Jenny reported the incident, the school's headmaster scheduled a disciplinary hearing for the white male student, as required by district policy.

An ad-hoc group of Asian Pacific American students, including leaders of the school's Chinese and Asian student clubs, quickly formed after the incident to demand that those responsible for racial harassment be seriously disciplined. These students also called for a more diverse curriculum and school-wide training in prejudice awareness and conflict resolution. To press their concerns, many of the school's Asian Pacific American students agreed to walk out of school en masse the next day when the disciplinary hearing was scheduled to take place. A modest multiethnic coalition also formed in solidarity.

The school administration responded immediately by threatening to suspend any

[2] With the exception of the CAPAY case study, the names of schools and individuals cited within are pseudonyms.

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student who walked out of school. Not wanting to jeopardize their academic standing, students agreed to cancel the walkout and, in its place, to meet as a group with the administration. Following the meeting, the school's headmaster expressed surprise at how marginalized the Asian Pacific American students felt from the larger school community. She asserted, "The kids have always worked together. We pride ourselves on having a nurturing atmosphere" (Tong, 1992, p.19).

Student views, however, contrasted sharply with this. Angela, a Chinese American senior, recalled:

> *An Asian girl, Lisa, was having a hard time with some white boys who kept telling her to give up her seat to them. Two teachers came over to see what the trouble was and ended up telling Lisa just to give her seat over to the boys!*

While describing examples of specific incidents among peers, many students also criticized school officials for denying that racism was a problem. Sunthon, a Lao American senior, stated, "It's totally swept under the rug, it's never discussed. It's a taboo subject and it goes completely unmentioned." Angela agreed, "The teachers did not seem to want to talk about what happened." Asian Pacific American students were not alone in these views. Bill, a white male sophomore observed, "The topic of racism is not really ever discussed in classrooms, but Asians get the most mistreatment as far as racism goes." Tonisha, an African American senior, added, "I've been in the school for six years and this is actually the first incident I ever remember being discussed."

The school's elite reputation figured prominently in staff and student discourse about racial conflict. Many were reluctant to report incidents because of not wanting to damage the school's public image. Jenny explained, "They try to create the impression that this kind of stuff doesn't happen at our school because we are an exam school." However, students also expressed disappointment, if not bitterness, with the lack of support they received from the school's faculty and administration. Sunthon explained:

> *The school clearly had a choice between supporting its students or looking good.... We approached them and they immediately tried to say, 'Oh, there's no such thing here,' covering it all up.... The whole point of going to [the headmaster] was to set a precedent, to let the student body know. But she did nothing; no letters, nothing over the intercom, nothing in the student newspaper.... She has so much power and she has done nothing.*

Kim, a Black sophomore, agreed, "Teachers don't want to talk about it, but we still bring it up. It's dying down and [the headmaster] wants it that way. We like her and she likes us, but when we go to her, she's too busy or she's in a meeting. Sometimes we think she's trying to save her own butt."

Recognizing the importance of having faculty who care, and especially having Asian Pacific American teachers as mentors, Angela explained:

> *Having younger teachers on the faculty is very important. Younger teachers have an easier time relating to students, they can understand what students are going through a lot better.... I can think of only one teacher—Mr. Siu who is Chinese—who really gets involved with his students.*

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However, students' disappointment also extended to some adults who were themselves Asian Pacific Americans. Kim recalled:

> *Even the [deputy] superintendent came. He's Asian and they [the Asian students] thought that he would side with them but he did not. He just kept putting them down. Whenever they thought they brought up a good point, he'd just put them down. He was really angry about the flyer which said 'Asian American Student Rally.'*

Through these experiences, Asian Pacific American students learned some hard lessons in how dynamics of race, culture, class, and power affect relationships in a school community. Although they had articulated a thoughtful, comprehensive set of proposals for school improvement that addressed such areas as school climate, the curriculum, faculty/staff hiring, student activities, and disciplinary policies, only one recommendation for a school-wide diversity awareness orientation was adopted by the administration. Even then, students had to do the legwork of identifying trainers and community resources to make it happen. Pointing to the school's failure as an educational environment, Sunthon declared:

> *[In school] there was hardly anything about race relations, anything about what it means to be a person of color in this country. The discussion is just not happening. We don't have a place where we can talk about it, a time when people can come together and talk it out instead of confronting it outside. People are just walking past each other in the hallways, sitting in the same classrooms, but they are not talking with one another. I think that needs to change, to not be so fearful that if we talk about racism, if we talk about prejudice, it's gonna lead into an uproar or a riot. I mean, give young people some credit! I mean, we have minds, let us exercise them.*

In the end, Jenny, the 16-year-old "victim," expressed her biggest disappointment with the school's disciplinary decision after the hearing. She recalled:

> *I resented the fact that she [the headmaster] seemed to be defending the boy by trying to make me understand that he was under a lot of pressure. That really has nothing to do with the kinds of things he said to me.... The boy ended up only being suspended for the rest of the day immediately after the hearing. He basically got to have a half-day, and I have been told that he cannot be retried in the hopes that he might receive some harsher punishment. That is it.*

Despite her frustration, though, Jenny voiced no regrets for her own actions, noting that "After the incident, a lot of students spoke to me about how similar incidents have happened to them.... Maybe the younger students will realize how important it is to come forward if this kind of stuff happens."

Developing Asian Student Organizations: Creating New Space in School

> *We were coming from a meeting of the Asian Club and white students threw oranges at us. Before that we had been standing in the hall and the supervisor kicked us out. So we went outside and they threw oranges. So there is nowhere to go* (Gibson, 1988, p.143).

When students at City Academy initially responded to the racial slur against Jenny, their first line of support came from the school's two Asian student organizations. In

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schools across the country, Asian Pacific American students have tried to establish their own clubs as a way of affirming each other, while also contributing to the broader school community. Organizations have taken the form of both pan-Asian and specific nationality clubs (Filipino or Korean, for example) as well as broader multicultural clubs and international or English as a Second Language (ESL) student associations. The impact of these groups individually and institutionally, however, has been uneven, depending in large part on how adults in particular schools and communities have chosen to relate to them, as the following case illustrates.

Case 2: City South High School

> *The [Vietnamese Student] Association is going to provide opportunities for the "torn leaves" to help the "more torn leaves."* [3]

City South High School is a non-selective urban high school with a student body that is 12% Asian, 24% Latino, 27% White, and 37% Black. Of the adults in the school, there are no Asian administrators, counselors, or regular education teachers. Khmer and Vietnamese bilingual teachers and para-professionals are the only Asian Pacific American staff inside the building.

Asian Pacific American students at City South, even more so than their peers at City Academy, vividly described examples of racial harassment, including name-calling and physical assault. One Vietnamese student sighed, "I feel like I get stepped on every day in that school." Like City Academy, however, the school's principal asserted, "we have not had confrontations, we have not had tensions" (Ellemont and Gorov, 1993, p.1).

Through interviews conducted for a larger study with 15 Vietnamese students ranging from 10th through 12th grade, every student recounted examples of witnessing or experiencing harassment as part of their daily lives. While one said, "The white kid is always messing with the Asian," another noted, "I experience problem with Blacks more than any other group," and still others described conflicts with Hispanic and Haitian students.

In three years' time, the number of Vietnamese students at City South tripled from 30 to more than 100. Most were newly arrived immigrants. School officials never discussed the implications of this dramatic demographic change within the school community. Many non-Asian students, therefore, disregarded the Vietnamese students' ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities as Vietnamese and, instead, assigned them a racial identity under the label of "Chinese" and "Chinks." Confusion surrounding the Vietnamese students' presence was evident in the experiences of almost every student interviewed. Thuy, a junior, recalled:

> *When we pass by them they give you some kind of like a dirty look.... They say, "Look at that Chinese girl," and then they call like, "Chinks, go back to where you belong."*

Whether because of personal experience, observation, or advice from friends and siblings, Vietnamese students at City South crafted individual survival strategies to get through school—typically by choosing to be quiet in class, rushing through the hallways in groups, confining themselves to particular

[3]Translation of unpublished speech delivered to the Vietnamese Student Association, 8 May 1992. "Torn leaves" refers to being Vietnamese refugees.

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tables in the cafeteria, and avoiding certain areas like the bathrooms where they expected racial conflict. Ky, a 12th grader, explained:

> *I try to keep myself very, very careful, you know. I think about where I'm going before I'm going there... My eye open... so I can get out some situation quickly as I can.*

A few students, however—those who had lived in the U.S. longer than five years and who were more proficient in English—asserted themselves as equal members of the school community. This challenged the school's social dynamics according to Kieu, another senior:

> *I see other Asian student.... After the class change they just go straight to the class or they walk in a whole group.... [But] Ky and I or even Thuy, it seems like we speak more English, and we walk like [we're] a part of the school.... That's why the problems started.... They want to be power in the school.... When I walk in school I feel like I'm equal to anybody else. And I guess that what they not wanted.*

In this context, with the escalating needs of Vietnamese students going unrecognized at City South, Thuy, Ky, and Kieu decided to launch a Vietnamese club for the school. Thuy's idea for the club grew out of her middle school experience in another state:

> *They have all kind of ESL, bilingual programs for Asian kids [at the middle school]...and they have this club called the ESL club...and all Asian kids can join the club and the teachers, the ESL teacher, she do a lot of activity with us.... Then I went to City South. I saw a lot of Vietnamese kids, right, they don't speak English at all, but the school didn't do anything for them. It's like either they learn or they don't.... So I felt kind of bad, and I start talk to my teacher.... I complain to her. And I say that they should have an ESL program or something you know. Or at least a Vietnamese club that we could help those students.*

Ky voiced similar sentiments, "I just miss the old school back in Vietnam, so I want to try to recall some of those memories. We wanted to form a club so we can all get together."

Assisted by a Vietnamese tutor from a local university, a Cambodian bilingual teacher, and another teacher of English, the group attracted roughly 30 students to its first meeting. Ky and Kieu delivered the welcome speech:

> *None of us wants, 10 to 20 years later when we travel half our lives, to not have any nice memory about our first steps into life at our student age. The Vietnamese Student Association is going to be the first means to help us to build those memories.... Of course, the Vietnamese Student Association is not going to be a place only for fun. But it is also the place for studying.... We will have occasions to improve and exchange our experiences as students and the initial difficulties when trying to adapt into new schools and a new society. We can share the good poems, the good novels and songs in order to help keep the national (Vietnamese) culture in our hearts. This is also a good way that we can prove to the foreigners that even though we have to take their culture daily, we are not going to forget to improve our national culture.*[4]

Participants in the first meeting discussed their hopes for the club to provide academic and ESL tutoring, advice about cultural

[4]Translation of unpublished speech delivered to the Vietnamese Student Association, 8 May 1992.

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expectations in U.S. society, and ways to share Vietnamese language and culture. After three well-attended meetings, however, the club had still not gained any backing from the school itself, particularly in terms of having an approved time and place to meet. While some teachers were willing to help when asked, others criticized the new club for encouraging segregation. Thuy observed, "They [school personnel] are not so happy about [the club]... it's so hard up here to do those things."

The club also faced internal conflicts, reflecting gender dynamics and differences in acculturation. Thuy recalled:

> *At every meeting when I open my mouth, he [Ky] always jump in and say let him handle it.... The guy try to be the head, you know. They don't want any young lady or woman to take their place. So every thing I say, he always jump in and cut me off. So that's a problem.*

These gender conflicts reflected important issues for the students to work through. Ky asserted, "Most of the girls I know who've been here more than two years, they always act that way. They're bolder, aggressive." Thuy countered:

> *A lot of Vietnamese kids go to school, whatever the people say, they just sit there. They sit there and be quiet.... I say no! I'm not gonna sit there and be quiet. I won't. I won't be quiet.*

Without adequate bilingual/bicultural faculty or staff in the school, no one helped the students analyze their attitudes or guided their actions. As a result, students were unable, individually or collectively, to sustain their organizing initiative and overcome the lack of formal, institutional support they received from the school's administration.

Interestingly students found no guidance at home either. None had told their parents about either their interests in the club or their problems with racial harassment at school. A junior noted, "They don't know what happened, and they feel okay because they don't know everything. My mother and father don't speak English." Ky described the relationships between Vietnamese students and their parents in these terms:

> *Our parents not involved enough in our schools. One of the things is English barrier. They try and protect themselves inside their house...and sometime they too busy with their work, trying to earn a living, trying to survive in this society. So they try so hard they just forget about us.... I don't blame at all. They try so, make a living so hard.*

Though very conscious of the sacrifices and hardships their parents endured in order to provide a better life for their families, most students did not describe close relationships with their parents. While challenging Vietnamese students' silence in school, Thuy sighed that her parents viewed her as "too Americanized" at home. Kieu also felt discouraged that her parents did not understand the difficulties she faced at school. She revealed to them some of the more dramatic incidents of racism that she experienced only after they criticized her for receiving mediocre grades. Kieu explained, "I go home and struggle. When I go outside, outside I struggle."

Without space or sanction, the Vietnamese Student Association dissolved after two months and was not re-activated during the following year. Ironically, instead of embracing Vietnamese students' leadership and resourcefulness in responding to a growing need within the school, some adults at City South labeled students' efforts to orga-

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nize themselves and support their newcomer peers as separatist and divisive. This dominant response by adults was both powerful and chilling. Similar dynamics play out in the next case that focuses on choices and priorities for the curriculum.

Confronting the Curriculum: Anything Goes

> *Rich man cannot buy Chinese honor.*
> *I'll make it five thousand.*
> *Chinese honor sold.*
> —dialogue from the musical,
> *Anything Goes* [5]

In the previous two cases, urban Asian Pacific American students organized to improve their school environment by challenging racial harassment and addressing their own needs for academic, social, and cultural support. Adults, in large part, failed to respond meaningfully to the issues raised by students in each situation. Though focusing their efforts primarily on peer relations, the students in those cases acknowledged and linked their concerns to issues of curriculum development and the need for faculty to foster diversity awareness.

Sunthon at City Academy, for example, stated explicitly, "We should have a diversified curriculum, a multicultural curriculum to teach that people without white skin are not outsiders." Ky from City South asserted, "Talk about this [racial conflict] to kids.... Start from kindergarten, first grade, second grade...teach them to live together, to tolerate with people, respect people." In the next case, Asian Pacific American students directly confronted the curricular choices and priorities of their teachers.

Case Study 3: Westlake Suburban High School

Westlake High School serves roughly 800 students in a wealthy, predominantly white, suburban town. Asian Pacific Americans comprise only 2% of the high-school student body. There is one teacher of color (African American) and no Asian Pacific American teachers, counselors, or administrators, in the building.

As a high point of each spring school period, faculty in Westlake's Drama Department select a play or musical for the student Drama Club to perform publicly. Choosing the play represents a major curricular decision for the school, with significant, and sometimes controversial implications for faculty time and student learning. This was the case, especially when the play includes controversial content—as when Cole Porter's musical, *Anything Goes*, was selected. Written in the 1930s, Anything Goes, includes two characters named "Ching" and "Ling" who are portrayed as subservient gamblers in need of Christian conversion and described in the script as "two Chinamen" (Bolton et al., 1977, p.67). They and other characters speak pidgin English, like "so soree no sow wild oats in China, sowee wild rice" (Bolton et al., 1977, p.103) and imitate Chinese nonsense syllables such as "Confucius say, Wa ho ding so le tow" (Bolton et al., 1977, p.106).

Concerned about the high public profile

[5] See, Bolton, G., Wodehouse, P.G., Lindsay, H., and R. Crouse. 1997. Anything Goes. NY: Tams-Witmark Music Library, p.103.

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and legitimacy that the musical would lend to racial stereotypes, Asian Pacific American students challenged the play's demeaning references to Chinese men and women as well as to Chinese language and music. With no active Asian student club in the school, the Diversity Club, which included students of many backgrounds who were committed to promoting multicultural awareness, took the lead.

After analyzing the script and developing what they considered to be reasonable demands for changes, members of the club led by Cara, a Chinese American senior, prepared a leaflet outlining their concerns, and distributed it in faculty mailboxes, albeit without approval. School administrators, however, removed the leaflet before most faculty saw it and criticized the students for "not following procedures." Students' demands included: "No Pidgin English," "No Fake Asian Languages," "Change the Names of Ching and Ling," and "Cut Out the Word 'Chinamen'." Referring to the school's student handbook, students stated, "If this racist behavior (slurs) is not tolerated in the school halls, it should not be tolerated on stage for a public school play."

As tension about the musical and the Diversity Club's unmet demands intensified, club members agreed to meet directly with the Drama Department's faculty and Drama Club students to voice their differences. The meeting, however, only escalated the conflict further. Anita, a Chinese immigrant senior, described the reaction of the Drama Club students as: "Why are the Asians making a big fuss? It's just a play." Wendy, a Chinese immigrant junior, similarly recalled:

> *We were going through the play point by point, and there were lines specifically that Cara was going over, and people were asking what's wrong with that? She was trying to explain it and they wouldn't understand.*

Asian Pacific American students were especially critical of the Drama Department chair who, as director of the play, defended his selection of Anything Goes based on the entertainment value of its music/dance numbers. Cara challenged him in the meeting, explaining that the play was offensive rather than entertaining for many Asian Pacific Americans. Radha, an Indian immigrant junior, described the chair's reaction:

> *He didn't handle it right because then he went bitching to his students.... Obviously he didn't want to hear what Cara was saying, and then his students became hostile and they were after us, too.*

Wendy added, "He didn't handle the situation discreetly...maybe he was angry or maybe he was worried," to which Anita replied, "He might have been insulted because she [Cara] criticized his choice as a teacher, and then he was embarrassed so he had to cover it up or something."

The Drama Department chair rebutted students' demands by accusing them of advocating censorship. From that point on, the students never recovered from being placed on the defensive. Discussion among both students and faculty shifted to protecting First Amendment rights and artistic license rather than recognizing diversity and making responsible educational choices.

At a faculty meeting called to discuss the controversy, many teachers voiced support for the Drama Department chair's position. Anita recalled, "There were [only] a couple of teachers who spoke on our behalf at the Faculty Meeting, but they didn't follow through, so nothing came of that."

In a letter to an Asian Pacific American parent who had expressed concern about the play, the principal articulated the school's official view:

> *While canceling the play would have been an option, I felt that it would be more educationally sound for the students and teachers to engage in dialogue about the concerns and feelings that they had about both the negative stereotyping in the play and the dangers of censorship in an educational community.*

The show did go on. As a concession to the students, however, a statement on the inside back cover of the program booklet for the musical acknowledged that some in the school community had found the play racist and offensive. The statement also explained that the English and Social Studies departments had facilitated class discussions about Asian American stereotypes in order to understand the socio-historical context of the play.

Yet, when asked how thorough or systematic these discussions had been, Anita replied, "it did not happen. They were going to talk about it in English and History, and then they didn't." Students saw that only a couple of teachers actually tried, but had such limited knowledge of the issues, that the discussions seemed counter-productive. Wendy recalled:

> *One of our English teachers brought up the play and basically the whole class was arguing like why are these Asians so upset.... This other girl, she was Black, she understood, but the other people were basically like, 'I don't care, it's just a play, it's just for fun'.... I felt like the whole class was against the Asians, and I just felt hurt by it.... After class I just started crying, and then my English teacher came over to me and said, 'I'm sorry you had to go through this'.... She tried to do something, you know. She said maybe we can discuss it after the play, but then she never went through with it.*

Like the first two cases, Westlake students were clearly disappointed in the lack of support they received from adults in the school. But unlike the first two cases where students' working-class, immigrant parents typically knew little about and did not participate directly in their children's school experiences, Westlake High Asian Pacific American parents, though also immigrants, tended to intervene more directly in their children's school lives, perhaps due to their own bilingual, highly educated professional backgrounds.

Yet, parent intervention did not mean support for student activism. If anything, the Westlake High parents played a major role in consciously limiting how intensively the students were able to advocate for their demands. Cara, for example, revealed in writing:

> *Just about everyone is upset, frustrated and fed up. Anita had a big fight with her parents last night because they want her to concentrate on school. My parents are concerned with the scholarship issue. It's a bummer but my Dad is the one who's gonna pay my college tuition.... We really do not have support from other parents/kids.*

Indeed, Cara's parents were counting on her winning a major scholarship to a local university, but this depended on receiving outstanding recommendations from her teachers and the principal. Not wanting to risk those relationships, Cara's father halted her activism. He stated in a phone conversation at the time, "I don't think Cara should be involved in this any longer. Living in this country, I've learned you have to look out for number one."

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Also in sharp contrast to City Academy and City South, no student at Westlake described experiences of direct physical harassment. As a much smaller minority population [2% compared with 19% at City Academy and 12% at City South], Asian Pacific American students' sense of their struggle at Westlake seemed more diffuse and less urgent. Anita analyzed the dynamics this way:

> *I don't think a lot of people realized that they're Asian. They're kind of separated here. There's no like Asian unity. Like a lot of my friends from other cities, there's so many Asians there, and it's kinda cool 'cause they hang out and stuff...but there's no sense of Asian unity here at all.*

Radha echoed, "Most Asians here are passive, and I'm passive, too, so people don't really know each other and they don't make an effort to get together and have an Asian club."

As a result, Wendy concluded:

> *It made me realize even more that Asians are like, no one listens to them. Like if the African Americans came out and said something, probably the people in the school would have done something, but when the Asians come out, no one really does anything.*

Radha also pointed to the dominant black-and-white paradigm of race relations as a barrier preventing Asian Pacific American issues from being addressed in meaningful ways at the school. She explained:

> *I went to a racism workshop like a week ago, and I was like, cool, let's talk about racism. So I went in and they were just talking about black-and-white problems and I was like, wait a second, there are Asian problems, you know. And they were like, oh yeah, and then they discussed it like for a minute.*

Based on their direct experiences, Asian Pacific American students found their issues, concerns, and perhaps even their very presence, to be marginal at Westlake. In questioning the judgement of a senior faculty member and forcing a school-wide examination of bias in one aspect of the curriculum, their efforts were quickly undermined both by adults who labeled their intent as censorship and by non-Asian peers who viewed them as "over-sensitive." Wendy recalled:

> *It's like the day we were having that discussion in my English class, and everyone was focusing on me, like looking at me saying, "Don't you think you shouldn't censor stuff?" They were looking straight at me like "what's the problem?"*

Although the Drama Club made some minor changes to the production in order to appease the Asian Pacific American students, the basic flaws remained. By the time the performances took place, the Asian Pacific American students had long given up their demands. Some had followed their parents' wishes to disengage from the controversy, while others simply could not envision ways to overcome their marginalized minority position. An Asian Pacific American community leader, invited by some students to attend the performance, offered powerful testimony that confirmed the depth of students' disempowerment within this wealthy, suburban school:

> *I never felt so silenced in my life. It was like a sea of white, the whole auditorium, with everyone cheering and clapping, being really proud of their kids. But what about our kids? It's like we weren't even there.*

In looking back at the chain of events leading to the performance, Anita, Radha, and Wendy placed some of the responsibility on

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their own Asian Pacific American community for having allowed others to define their image. But they also criticized inaction by the school administration, using language almost identical to students at both City South and City Academy. Wendy stated:

> *She is the principal, so I think she should care about what her students are concerned with. I mean, if they have any concerns, she should do something about it.*

Anita added, "I think she just wants to sweep it under the rug, which she did." Radha agreed, "Again, just like other incidents that Westlake has swept under the rug and never dealt with at all."

For Cara, whose initial outrage had compelled her to challenge Westlake's faculty and curriculum, she concluded, perhaps wisely:

> *Other racial stuff is BOUND to occur in Westlake, believe me. Next time it will go further. We'll achieve more. I guess we all have to learn to be patient.*

Although her tempered assessment of Westlake seems realistic, Cara needs to know that active intervention and dramatic change are possible if resources and support are consciously mobilized. This is the lesson from the following final case.

Organizing for Empowerment: We Could Shape It

> We believe that youth united by a common purpose can make a difference. We aim to establish a forum for free dialogue and for positive change in our communities. Our initiatives are diverse and include avenues to abolish stereotypes, to educate ourselves and others about Asian Pacific America, to celebrate our heritage, and to improve race relations.
>
> —Mission Statement, Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth[6]

The previous three case stories illustrate some of the substantial struggles waged in different settings by Asian Pacific American high-school students to organize and empower themselves. Without support from adults either at school or at home, these cases clearly do not represent victories or success stories. One might conclude, in fact, that while the desires for youth empowerment may be ardent—which by itself should be cause for respect and celebration—nevertheless, the prospects appear discouragingly slim.

In contrast, the final case focuses on the experiences of a core group of students who organized a landmark, regional conference for Asian Pacific American youth from which emerged an ongoing Asian Pacific American regional youth network.

Case 4: Conference/Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth

When an ad-hoc group of adults and youth first gathered to discuss how community resources could support Asian Pacific American students confronting the issue of racial harassment in school, no one imagined that a few months later nearly 700 young people from more than 50 high schools would attend a Conference for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY). The ad-hoc group convened at first because such little

[6]Drafted by Ivan Chan and ratified by CAPAY on 14 May 1994.

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support seemed to be coming from home or school.

Following a series of open-ended initial meetings, a core group of 50 students—primarily seniors from various high schools in the region—agreed to work with each other in planning a conference that would gather Asian Pacific American youth together, and provide opportunities for gaining awareness, sharing experiences, and raising voices in unity. Adults affiliated with a range of community groups, local universities, and state agencies agreed, in turn, to pool resources to support the youths' organizing efforts. Although most of the core group of young people had never met or worked with each other before, they quickly immersed themselves in a collective process to make CAPAY happen, working as interns every day during the summer and every Sunday throughout the fall.

Organizing the conference brought together many students who had been active in their own schools, often as the only Asians in multicultural clubs or school-wide leadership bodies. After the first meeting, Samantha, a senior from an urban, predominantly Black and Hispanic community, admitted, "I was like shocked because in my school as far as Asians, I'm the one who does everything." Lisa, a senior from an affluent, predominantly white suburban town, recalled, "It was the first time in my life that I had been in a room with people who feel the same way I do. I'm so used to being like the only Asian speaking about Asian issues." Lauren, a Chinese immigrant senior from an urban school, added, "I'm always like the only Asian, but when I started working on this, it's like I can have friends that share the same interest, who have these common goals to work on."

For some, this experience was both thrilling and threatening—directly challenging and, at the same time, affirming their racial, cultural, and social identities. Amy, a Korean American senior from a suburban school, revealed:

> *When I first walked in, I swear, I just wanted to turn around and walk right out, I was so intimidated. I've never really been in a room with so many Asian students in my age group. I was like, what am I doing here? And then I started coming to the meetings, and I got more involved in it, and I was like, oh my god, you know this is really cool! Asians are cool! [laughs].*

In addition to their urban/suburban and public/private differences in school and socioeconomic status, core group members' ethnicities included Lao, Vietnamese, Pakistani, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese Chinese, Indian, Taiwanese, and Khmer. Sharing each others' backgrounds while working together on a common goal generated unforgettable learning. Chia Chia, a Taiwanese immigrant, exclaimed:

> *I learned a lot from the others. They broke all my stereotypes. Like Pakistani women having no rights, but then I met Attia. I never heard of Cambodia, Laos, etc., and I never thought they were Asians. But then I met Sarouem and Chan and Vira and Chantala. I've always thought Japanese believe they are the best and they don't care about other Asians. But Isamu showed me that he cares in a lot of ways. Many people broke my stereotypes and I'm glad.*

Amidst this diversity, Ivan, a working-class Chinese senior from a suburban school, noted the affection and mutual commitments

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that emerged among the group, "It feels like a family, and we're very close and somehow we have a lot of differences, but we are very open to each other. I don't see that often in other activities." Lauren also emphasized the community-building aspect of the process, especially appreciating "the friendship that we have all built or gained through organizing."

Vira, a Lao senior from an urban school, added:

> *The first meeting was so exciting! You had a roomful of Asian American youths talking about some of the things that concerned them. Just so many different types of people, and it really impacted me. There was a real sense of "This is for us" "you know. And we could make it into whatever we wanted. We could shape it, we could develop it, and I think that was really powerful.*

Others like Chantala, a Lao freshwoman in college, gained a similar sense of power and purpose from the conference planning process. She recalled realizing, "Instead of everything that's happening to us, it's how we are affecting the outcome." In contrast to the discouragement and disempowerment of students in the previous three cases, the structure, resources, and praxis developed for CAPAY all served to respect, support, and enable those who participated. The difference is striking and fundamental.

Planning for the conference plenary sessions and workshops introduced the organizers to a wealth of community resources and to older generations of activists with whom they could relate. Topics ranged from gangs and media stereotypes to inter racial dating and parent–youth relations to civil rights strategies and curriculum reform. Michele, a Filipina college student, noted, "Before, if I got an idea in my head, I would be like, too bad I can't do it. But all of us know the outlets to go now, we have connections we can make."

Members of the core group spoke in moving terms about the significance of working with the adult advisors. Amy commented, "At school, there are no Asian teachers or faculty members, and it's awesome seeing like cool Asian adults.... It's a really good influence." Ivan agreed:

> *In my entire school, there are no Asian teachers that are full-time. And it's a really negative aspect that I never really thought of until I started coming to CAPAY and then finding adults who are great leaders and who are also very good role models. And that makes such a difference because when I was younger, I didn't really have any Asian American role models, and it was so bad.... That really limited my options when I was younger, and that's why I was such an inactive kid.*

The process and impact of the conference transformed those who organized it. Chantala exclaimed, "It's given me a much clearer sense of what I want to accomplish in life." Michele added, "Now I can look at the future as being something I can help try to mold and not just think that everything is not going to change. I have a brighter outlook." Amy rejoiced:

> *I've become really proud of who I am and where I come from, and I know that I've become stronger. I'm no longer that silent anymore.... I have really found myself.*

Lisa similarly reflected:

> *CAPAY taught me how powerful the Asian community could be and how powerful I, as an Asian American woman, could be. I became "empowered"—full of hope and optimism. It boosted me and made me see the need to be*

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more active. It instilled confidence, and gave me a voice.

Originally expecting 250 participants, the organizers had to change the date and location of the conference when over 600 students preregistered. Although many conference participants complained in the workshops and plenary sessions about "apathy" among their Asian Pacific peers, the overwhelming response to CAPAY ironically indicated just the opposite. Noting this irony, members of the core group analyzed student disinterest or apathy in light of their own evolution in becoming active. Lisa explained, "It's not because they don't want to know, but because they haven't been taught to know what they should know, and they haven't been given the chance to do something about it, to be empowered." With the CAPAY conference providing that first chance for many, Michele observed, "The more people get used to forums like a conference, the more they will feel that they can speak up some place."

Although most core members had already been active in their own schools prior to CAPAY, their work on the conference greatly advanced their own leadership skills. Attia, a Pakistani American junior and elected student government head from a suburban school, reflected:

Organization and leadership: I discovered new ways to think about these qualities. All of us were trying to accomplish the same goal, but in such different ways. We had a lot of conflicting ideas, yet we were good friends. I learned how to be more open and democratic.... It really is a process—brainstorming, working with people, putting it on paper, trying it out, implementing it, seeing what happens—that's something really cool that I learned... This was the first big event that I had a real impact on. It's so easy to say, "oh, things will never change," so easy to let all this energy inside me become negative energy. But it's a lot more fun trying to solve things. You can always make things better.

Five months after the historic first conference, 60 youths gathered to reinvent CAPAY as an ongoing *Coalition* for Asian Pacific American Youth. Governed by a steering committee and general membership consisting entirely of youth and supported by an adult advisory group and the Asian American Studies program of a local public university, CAPAY continues to serve as a unique vehicle for networking, skill-building, and leadership-training among immigrant and American-born Asian Pacific youth of many nationalities, from urban and suburban backgrounds and both public and private schools. While sponsoring a major annual conference as well as retreats, a quarterly newsletter, a summer learn-and-serve program, and many other activities, CAPAY is working toward long-term institutionalization within the Asian Pacific American community.[7]

As CAPAY continues to evolve, it not only provides a valuable voice for youth, it actively enables individual young people to take on larger leadership roles in various Asian Pacific American communities. Several community organizations, for example, have invit-

[7]CAPAY's second conference took place in March 1995 and once again attracted 700+ youth from 60+ schools and communities. The conference also added separate sessions and a resource room for adult teachers and parents who accompanied the youth as chaperones. A third conference, held in March 1996, enabled youth leadership teams from 50+ schools to plan and implement activities in celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month in May—a first for most schools involved.

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ed CAPAY members to serve as speakers, to evaluate programs and services from a youth perspective, and even to become board members. CAPAY has also advanced the visions and prospects of a multiracial youth movement. While CAPAY members have participated in many multiracial youth conferences and rallies, some Latino students have discussed how to develop their own youth network, using CAPAY as an organizational model.

CAPAY is also significant as an alternative model to gangs for organizing Asian Pacific American youth. Asian youth gangs have proliferated in recent years, reflecting a variety of factors, including limited job opportunities, fragmented family support systems, and academic as well as social alienation due to linguistic and cultural barriers in school. Not unlike CAPAY, however, many gangs at the local level have formed explicitly to defend against racial harassment in school or in neighborhoods. According to a 21-year-old former Cambodian gang member, "Racism has shaped my life, my experience ever since the first day I set foot in this country.... In the gang, I watch your back, you watch my back. We look out for each other" (Kiang, 1994, pp.141–142). For many youth, neither their parents nor their teachers have offered the requisite support and multicultural understanding needed to deal with the realities of racism in school and on the streets.

Conclusions

The voices and experiences shared in this paper point out several significant lessons. In both urban and suburban schools, Asian Pacific American youth are actively seeking positive change. At the same time, they face indifference, misunderstanding, and active opposition from adults as well as peers. Although Asian Pacific American students in urban settings seem to confront more frequent and blatant examples of racial violence, suburban students' degree of disempowerment also seems severe.

Particular incidents or issues such as the harassment of Jenny at City Academy or selection of the Anything Goes musical at Westlake lead some Asian Pacific American students to plan rallies and assemblies, to draft petitions and public statements, and to form new organizations or activate existing ones to affect their situations in school. Through their organizing efforts, they seek to transform their schools into places "where we can talk" and "build those nice memories."

If asked, students also articulate connections between specific instances and a more general critique of learning environments at their schools. They point to gaps in the curriculum, for example, in the areas of Asian American Studies, multicultural awareness, and conflict resolution that reflect and reinforce the problems they experience. From their perspectives, "the discussion is just not happening" and "the school didn't do anything" to enable students or other members of the school community to understand, respect, and support each other. Even well-meaning teachers lack training in these critical areas and fail to "follow through" on their commitments.

As a result, students' hopes and demands for positive change in their schools go largely ignored or rejected. Yet, despite their frustrations, they feel their efforts are still important, if only to "help the more torn leaves" and set an example that encourages younger students "to come forward" so that "next time it will go

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further."

While denouncing administrators and teachers who ignore racial issues in order to protect their schools' images, students long for youth-centered, Asian Pacific American adult mentors and role models with whom they can identify. When provided with opportunities to collaborate with community-based Asian Pacific American adult activists, young people identify much more directly with the possibilities of making positive change for themselves, their schools, and their communities. They also quickly recognize the absence of comparable individuals within their schools and, in most cases, within their families.

Harassment, exclusion, and marginalization contrast sharply with the oft-repeated dreams of immigrant and refugee families who come to this country for the sake of the children. Yet parents do not offer significant support for students' organizing efforts in school. In urban settings, the students' immigrant and working-class parents have little direct involvement with their children's lives in school because of economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers that prevent their participation. In suburban settings, immigrant parents with professional class backgrounds may be more knowledgeable and comfortable in dealing with school matters, but they discourage and restrict their children's organizing activities, particularly if such activism leads to confrontations with school personnel.

The voices of Asian Pacific American students in this chapter deserve and demand recognition. Far greater communication and coordination are needed between youth and their families, schools, and communities. Over the long-term, Asian Pacific American parents themselves need multilingual and multicultural leadership training and organizing to better understand their children's experiences and to gain greater accountability from schools, service agencies, and local governments.

Given the profound absence of family and school-based interventions to ensure Asian Pacific American children's daily physical and emotional integrity in school, community interventions like CAPAY are urgently needed. Providing an alternative model to the group empowerment, such as gangs, the CAPAY model not only affirms the efforts of young people, but provides them with relevant resources, skills, and an environment within which to transform themselves individually and collectively. The continuing programmatic success and personal impact of CAPAY suggest a larger need for Asian Pacific American communities to develop methods and structures to enable youth leadership more systematically.

If schools are to become authentic sites of learning, support, and growth for Asian Pacific American and indeed for all students, then organizing projects like CAPAY will need much broader development and a direct connection to the schools themselves. This could take place along the lines of Vira's vision:

> *What I really want to see is the impact on schools.... If Asian Americans aren't respected in the student body and if they are constantly being excluded or overlooked in discussions concerning race, how are they going to see themselves? That's part of forging their identity. They won't see themselves as being powerful, they won't see themselves being adaptive. They'll see themselves as being really insignificant and hopeless.... We can use CAPAY as a way of legitimizing some of the*

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concerns we have, like having more Asian American faculty and administrators.... If the school is serious about its Asian American students, they're going to listen to what CAPAY has to say.

CAPAY and projects like it create rich resources not only for advocacy but also for continuing research on the process of organizing and outcomes of the Asian Pacific American youth empowerment. These potential long-term contributions, like those of the young people themselves, seem limitless.

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